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Peer Correction with Symbols at Secondary Level

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Peer correction can be considered to be an essential component of writing sessions because good writing does not happen overnight. Hinkel (2015) says writing is not just about putting ideas into paper, but choose words carefully so that it represents the very ideas of a particular writer. A lot of patience, reading and creativity are a must to improve writing skills. A fi ne piece of writing has to go through a rigorous process—brainstorming, first draft, fi rst editing, peer correction, proofreading fi nal draft and submission. These stages may help secondary level students and above polish and improve writing skills. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that teachers and students find it frustrating and may overlook multiple revisions of their writing. To make the best use of the ongoing lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, I redesigned a traditional in-class peer feedback task, during which students exchanged their papers with each other, read the papers and then discussed the grammatical errors they noticed.

It was working well quite a few years ago in my class. However, it was difficult to generate students' interest in writing. Students were inclined more to fixing language errors rather than commenting on content and organisation. No correction symbols were used and the papers used to be defaced by doodles and corrections. But this technique does not expect any papers or answers (soft copies) to be rough. Rather, this technique keeps peers engaged with each other's task through the use of checklist and a table of symbols. Students just check their checklists, use symbols, offer constructive feedback in a feedback box and email each other. This activity is not over after exchanging emails. They are encouraged to have more discussion on each other's writing using online platforms.

Note that the activity below is described for both paper-based and digital exchanges. And students should not be that digitally savvy. Students can exchange their stories accompanied by a feedback form and a checklist via email. Digital exchange can also be implemented through Google Docs, which allows multiple users to access the same document. In any digital exchange, though, it is crucial for teachers to demonstrate how to use that certain digital platform in class so that students know how to access the story, make comments, track changes, and accept or reject changes.

Proficiency level : intermediate to advance

Age group : 14+

Teaching hours : N/A

Objectives:

This activity has five objectives. On completion of this lesson, students are expected to: 1. identify different areas of errors and use correction symbols, 2. exchange emails, 3. master reading techniques like skimming, scanning, proofreading, etc., 4. learn how to incorporate five elements of a short story into their original story, and 5. offer constructive advice on the quality of a story.

Resources: Slides, handouts and worksheets

Procedure during the session

The task is comprised of four stages.

Step 1: Start your class (Zoom Meeting, Microsoft Meeting Team, Google Classroom, etc.) talking about the tradition of storytelling and story writing, and how fun it is to read a short story. A short story is a piece of prose fiction that can be read in one sitting. One sitting may take place for 2 hours. It also depends on one's reading pace. Charles (2002) defines that the short story focuses on a single event and a single effect. Short stories have fewer characters. That is why short stories are simpler than novels. Also, tell them why you personally love reading stories. This helps you to set a scene in class. As you know short stories generally consist of 5 elements: characters, setting, plot, conflict and theme. Show or send them a sample story each, where the aforementioned five elements are integrated (see appendix -1). But do not tell them what five elements of a short story are. Then, instruct students to read the sample story thoroughly.

Step 2: Tell students to think of or note down five elements of a short story within 5 minutes. Allow them to use any means/sources that they are comfortable or familiar with. They can communicate using the chat box. This hones their collaborative skills. After the allotted time is over, ask them to share their answers. Ask few not all students.

Step 3: Define each element of a short story. Simple definitions work better because every student may not be interested in this genre of literature. After you define each of them, you can ask some of your students to label the elements in the sample story. FIVE

ELEMENTS OF A SHORT STORY:

Characters are the heart of the story. A person, animal or nature that has a role is a character. The protagonist is the main character, whereas the antagonist is the villain.

Setting is the place and time of the story. Setting suggests a place where action takes place like cave, jungle, island, 19th century, etc.

Plot is the systematic arrangement of the events in the story. In general, a plot consists of a beginning, middle and an ending. Plot makes stories interesting.

Conflict is a problem in a story. The main character has to undergo some challenges and overcome them. There are four basic conflicts to look for that may trouble the main character:

a. Man versus man b. Man versus nature

c. Man versus himself/herself d. Man versus society

Theme is the controlling idea or the insight that the writer expects his or her readers to understand at the end of the story. The theme is often the writer's message.

Step 4: Now, instruct them to write their own story. It is better to set word limits of 300 words or more. It is not surprising to find some students who write a story as short as a paragraph. Once they are done, they should exchange stories with a partner of their own choice via email.

The steps to be followed at home by peers:

Give them the following instructions clearly.

Step 1: SKIM:

At home, skim your partner's original story with a red pen preferably. When you go through the story of your partner, do not doodle or scribble. It has to be as neat it was before. Then, briefly write your first thought about the content of the story in your notebook or a piece of paper. Consider whether and in what ways the story aligns with the checklist provided (see appendix-2).

Step 2: SCAN:

Scan the entire story and tick the five elements of a short story by ticking (√) the checklist. If any element is missing in the story, mark (X). Put a question mark (?) if any of the elements is not clear.

Step 4: REREAD:

Re-read your partner's story one more time, focusing on strengths of the story and points to consider for improving it. You can take notes on the story because humans tend to forget if not noted.

Step 5: FILL OUT:

Fill out the feedback form (see appendix-3). After reviewing your notes, list what you feel are the story's strongest points and explain the reasons why you find them good. Then, choose points that need improvement. Do not focus only on weaknesses. I strongly suggest that you start with strengths. Some of your classmates may be too sensitive!

Step 6: CORRECT:

Edit the partner's story. Apply the correction symbols technique (see appendix-4) in the story using a red pen preferably. Do not add or remove words but circle and underline (see appendix-5). After correction, exchange each other's corrected story along with the checklist and the feedback form.

Step 7: SHARE WITH YOUR PARTNER:

In next session, you and your partner will talk about your feedback. Read what you have written in the feedback form. Before the next session, you may have a conversation in any digital platforms to discuss each other's feedback and correction. In next session, if your partner has difficulty understanding your comments, try to explain them in a different way. You may also ask me (your teacher) for help. Please remember that your goal is to help your partner notice the story's strengths and the points to improve in order to continue to develop the story before the final draft.

Note to the teacher: The purpose of this activity is to engage students in writing and enable them to communicate with each other about their work. Sultana (2009) says peer correction enhances learner autonomy, cooperation, interaction and involvement. Contrarily, there may exist inferiority-complex problem between peers. Jeremy Harmer (2004) claims that we cannot overlook a possible problem with peer correction. Any student after getting corrected by a peer may feel inferior to his/her peer. Teachers need to teach students gently what the purpose of this task is and why s/he is employing this technique in their writing class. This will work. They are not real editors. Later, it is teachers' responsibility to go through their stories and give them final feedback on their draft for quality product.

Reflection

As a high school teacher, I implemented this activity with 14-16 year olds of English as a foreign language and received positive comments from the students, but the activity can also be adapted in diverse contexts to suit the need and standards. One reason this activity worked well in my classes is that students realised that peer feedback does not equal error correction.

References:

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May, Charles. (2002). *The Short Story: The Rabbits of Artifice.* New York, US: Routledge.

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Appendix 1: Sample story

Setting: a landlord's house

Characters: the old cat and rats

Plot: The cat grew old. Then, he played a trick on rats. He survived by killing gullible rats.

Conflict: the old cat versus rats

Theme

Gullible Rats

A very long time ago, there was an old yet clever cat. He used to live in a landlord's house. The cat had no children. He enjoyed his youthful life to the fullest. He used to behave like a king. At that time, he used to run after rats and eat them without any mercy.

As time went by, the cat grew too old to look after himself. Earlier, the cat went to different places to find food. But, now, it was old. It was deserted by other young friends. To survive he devised an idea of trapping rats. He wore garlands of flowers around his neck and walked ringing the bell.

On hearing the sound, rats hiding in the holes came out. The rats were surprised to see the cat with garlands. The cat stood his eyes shut. A curious rat went up to him and asked him, "Why are you wearing garlands of flowers around your neck? Have you done something remarkable?" The cat cleverly replied, "I have stopped committing crimes. I am a vegetarian now. I want to live a peaceful life. I am a true devotee of God." Rats trusted him and started walking fearlessly. For few days, the cat did no harm to rats. But later the number of rats was falling day by day. He was happy even in his old age.

Moral: We should not trust others too quickly.

Appendix 2: Checklist

a.	The story has an introduction.	☐
b.	The story has characters: one of animals, humans, things, etc.	☐
c.	The story has a setting.	☐
d.	The story has a plot.	☐
e.	The story has dialogue.	☐
f.	The story ends with suspense.	☐
g.	The story has a clear ending.	☐
h.	The story is interesting to read.	☐
i.	The story is of a reasonable length.	☐
j.	The story develops smoothly.	☐
k.	The story contains appropriate words, phrases, and sentences.	☐

Appendix 3: Feedback form

Your constructive feedback:

Dear ……....,

I enjoyed reading your story. I think your hook is captivating! You also ended your story with a happy ending. In addition, I really liked that you varied your use of words.. Your language was clear and to the point. I would like to make suggestions on how to improve your story for the final draft. First, I think that you should work on your punctuation.

Second, in this genre, you are expected to create more thrill and sensation to grip the attention of your readers. Your reader needs to be spellbound by your narrative.

At some points, you have used big words. For example, in paragraph 2, you have used big words like 'deserted' and 'devised'. However, your story contains very ordinary words which make your writing very simple for high school students.

Lastly, your story ends quite abruptly. If I were the writer, I would also mention what the old cat did after he finished killing the rats and where and how he died.

This is my feedback on your writing. Thank you for sharing it with me. If you have any questions, please feel free to communicate with me via Viber, email or Messenger.

Best,

……..

Appendix 4: Correction symbols

Types of correction	Symbols
full stop	⊙
question mark	(?)
exclamation mark	(!)
comma	(,)
other punctuation marks	Pn
tense	T
space	<>
conjunction	C
articles	A
preposition	Pr
adverb	Adv
adjective	Adj
pronoun	Prn
replacement	^
deletion	⊗
confusion	?
Incomplete	….
Add	⊕
capitalisation	©

Appendix 5: Corrected story

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Contributor:

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